

Witness Name: **GRO**
 Statement No.: WITN0204_01
 Exhibits: None
 Dated: 19 January 2022

THE POST OFFICE HORIZON INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF **GRO**

I, **GRO** WILL SAY as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Chair to be invited to provide a "human impact" statement, concerning the physical, psychological, emotional, reputational and financial consequences to me and my family of being held responsible for shortfalls shown by the Horizon IT system and Post Office Limited's actions toward me and my family. The initial paragraphs below provide a brief summary of my background, and provide context to the detail of the human impact of the Horizon scandal on me and my family. This statement does not reflect a full account of my experiences or those of my family and if necessary or required I will provide further witness statement evidence.

BACKGROUND

2. I am 54. I have been married for 15 years. After leaving school, I took a job with Cadburys in sales. I worked in this area for many years.
3. My father had a local shop that I had worked in as a child, and after a long career in sales I decided to buy a shop and run it. I bought the shop and post office in my

home village in Dove Ridge, on the High Street, in Dove Ridge, Derbyshire in approximately 30 May 2007. I ran it for approximately 4 years.

4. My marriage then broke down. I had to sell my post office, as part of the divorce settlement. I moved back to Lincolnshire. I then purchased the post office and became subpostmistress of Hemswell Cliff Post Office, Gainsborough Road, Hemswell. I also worked as a Temporary subpostmistress of Barrow post office, Barrow on Humber. I decided to take a year out, so I sold up and travelled for a year.
5. On my return, I purchased and became subpostmistress of GRO
GRO I started in November 2010 and
 I am still the subpostmistress at GRO I live in the post office,
 and I also run the village shop from the same premises.
6. GRO is also the smallest post office I have ever run. Most days it is open only from 9am – 1pm, and we are not open at the weekend. Despite this and the limited amount of money we take, this is the post office at which I have had the most serious and continuing problems with shortfalls. The GRO post office is the branch in which I have had the most serious difficulties with the Post Office's Horizon System.
7. I did not encounter serious issues with the other three branches I have worked at. There were often discrepancies/shortfalls, which I had to make up very regularly, and I now strongly suspect were problems with the Horizon system.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

8. In 2007, I had two weeks of in branch training in my first post office. It consisted of conducting transactions, as needed, when customers came in. The trainer also went through a weekly balance with me. There was never any guidance about what to do should the balance be short.

9. I do not think this was adequate because we only covered what customers asked for in this time. It was a quiet branch so there were certain things I was never trained on. I do not think the training was anywhere near sufficient to prepare me to use the system, as there is no guarantee that all the transactions will be covered. All I was trained on were the transactions for the small number of customers who walked through the door at the time of training.

10. I received no further training.

Helpline

11. I would estimate that I contacted the Helpline once every couple of months regarding alleged shortfalls. I found them to be of little help. They would take you through checks that could be performed. However, almost always staff said that they could not assist, and that I would have to put in the money to make up the balance. I have always made up the shortfalls that arose in my post offices over the years, as no other option is given. No matter what the problem is, you are responsible.

SHORTFALLS

12. In this section, I set out in very brief detail my experience of shortfalls arising from deficiencies in the Horizon IT System, and Post Office Limited's actions as a result. This is only a brief introduction to those matters, in order to provide necessary context for the explanation of the human impact which follows.

13. Over the many years I have been subpostmistress, I have experienced many shortfalls. Almost every week there was a shortfall, often small, but there was almost never an occasion when the balance was over (i.e. a surplus, where there was more money in the balance than there should have been). I found it very odd that the balance was almost always under rather than over.

14. There were some larger shortfalls that were very worrying. For example, my post office got a Transaction Correction on Horizon for £200 credit for a Moneygram transaction. I had never and have never done a Moneygram transaction in my life, and would not even know how to do one. Clearly, this transaction, which arose on the Horizon System, had nothing to do with me or my post office.
15. I contacted the Helpline and also Andrew Carpenter (my post office manager) about this. They said that they would look into it, but were unable to work out why this transaction had displayed. I wanted to give the money back to the Post Office, but they would not accept it. It worries me that some other subpostmaster would have lost this money from his or her system, because the Horizon System was faulty.
16. In or around November 2016 there was a significant shortfall, of £1,231.50, which accumulated from two alleged losses. It was impossible for my tiny rural branch office to run a loss of figures this large. I simply did not have a high enough turnover to incur such high losses. Sometimes, I only sell a few stamps per day. I would have noticed immediately if there was a cash loss of this magnitude and I would notice this shortage straight away.
17. I kept a copy of the cash on hand and detailed accounts. Additionally, I received a cash delivery of £2,500 every fortnight. An actual loss of this size would be immediately notice. As a result, I was certain that the shortfall must have been caused by the Horizon System.

Audit

18. I immediately shut the post office, despite the shortfall occurring at Christmas, during my busiest time of the year. I did not wish to risk continuing to trade, as this might affect the audit trail or that more large shortfalls would arise. I called the helpline and reported the shortfall. I told them that I was closing the post office until such time as there had been an audit.

19. The Helpline told me that they were looking into the shortfall and that they had people investigating. Two people did telephone me but neither said they could find anything wrong, nor identify any transactions that looked as though they had been done incorrectly. When I rang the Helpline I was told they were looking into it. I refused to work for two weeks in December 2016 whilst they looked into it. I was told I had to balance, roll over into January, and settle the shortfall centrally.
20. I thought that the problem was with the Horizon System and not the transactions. I telephoned Fujitsu to look into this and the lady I spoke to did not speak good English, so I could not make myself understood. I tried to explain that I thought it was a computer glitch but she did not understand and so the matter could not be investigated by Fujitsu. I also mentioned this to the Helpline and they said they thought it was my mistake, and not a computer glitch, and that they could find no evidence of any fault with the system. They implied that it was my fault because I was the postmaster and I was pressing the buttons and completing the transactions.
21. I stayed shut until the New Year. However, I agreed to open on a limited basis, so long as the Post Office agreed to park this shortfall in the accounts and system. I had requested that the Post Office conduct an audit, but the audit did not occur until 1 February 2017, when it was conducted by David Longbottom.
22. Mr Longbottom attended my small post office. He was very nice. He checked my books, records, and the system. Mr Longbottom said he could not find anything wrong in the branch. He informed me that he was impressed with the way I ran my office, said he didn't feel that there was anything wrong with the way I was running it the post office. Mr Longbottom said he was going to request that the Post Office send him the transaction logs from November 2016 to go through those and try and establish what the problem was. Later, he rang me to let me know that the Post Office had refused him access to my November transaction logs. He told me that this was something which had never happened to him before and the Post Office had never refused him information previously.

23. Mr Longbottom also advised me, off the record, not to repay the alleged shortfall as this would be classed by Post Office Ltd as an admission of guilt. I heard nothing further about the investigation, and I thought the Post Office were still looking into it. My contract manager (Andy Carpenter) then rang me and told me that the Post Office was going to make deductions from my remuneration to make good the alleged shortfall. The Post Office started making deductions from my remuneration from July 2017 without my permission to repay these alleged shortfalls.
24. The Post Office did not pursue civil proceedings or criminal proceedings against me in relation to the alleged shortfalls. However, this is because I paid the Post Office back, despite this clearly not being my responsibility. I also feel very lucky that I did not experience more large shortfalls. This is because I know from my experience that if I had had other major shortfalls I would have been held accountable for them by the Post Office whether or not those shortfalls were my fault.

Human Impact

25. Despite the Post Office auditor finding that this was not my fault or responsibility, the Post Office still took the sum out of my wages. I had to pay £100 per month for a year, and I couldn't do anything to stop it. The £100 a month deduction may not seem like much, but it was my salary that I needed it to pay my mortgage and bills. The relationship between subpostmaster and the Post Office was so unequal, it was almost in a master/servant relationship. The Post Office did not care about its subpostmasters, particularly those running the small post offices in villages:
26. The problems with the Horizon System have impacted my whole time with the Post Office. The number of times over the last 17 years I have had to put money into my office is frightening. I will never be able to calculate the full financial cost, but the personal cost has been significant.
27. As a subpostmaster, you have to conduct your balance on a Wednesday. So every Wednesday for years I have been frightened by what the balance will show, as you are always sure that it will be wrong, no matter what you do. Almost every week over the

past 17 years I have had to put in money to ensure the balance is correct. It is almost always wrong, no matter how many checks you can do. It makes you doubt yourself and your staff.

28. The lovely lady who has worked with me for some 8 years in the post office was greatly upset by the £1,200 shortfall, as she thought I blamed her for it. It was not her fault. The Post Office's actions damaged my personal relationships, and trust between colleagues and friends.
29. In addition, I lost customers, as some felt that there was "no smoke without fire". People asked me why I had closed the post office and I told them that the post office was £1,200 short, so I could not operate the post office. Unfortunately, some people believed that I had some involvement in the loss of this money and stopped using the post office.
30. Although I did not suffer the severe shortfalls that other subpostmasters did, and I was not convicted or civil action taken against me, I lived in fear of shortfalls for many years, which were the fault of the Horizon system.
31. Since the large, £1,200 shortfall arose, and the way the Post Office treated me, I decided that I could no longer continue as a subpostmistress. I felt that the risk was too high. I decided to put my post office on the market, however, it has not been possible to sell the premises. I believe that the problems with the Post Office and its Horizon System has put people off the idea of being a subpostmaster, as they believe it to be too risky. The impact is still ongoing.

CONCLUSION

32. I have been lucky. The shortfalls I suffered were nowhere near as severe as others. I feel that I was very lucky, as the £1,200 shortfall could have been £12,000. I would love to see justice for those subpostmasters who have suffered so much more than me.

33. I and other subpostmasters provide a vital public service, particularly in rural areas like my own. I believe that things have improved and my current area manager has been supportive and accessible.
34. However, in the recent past the support was not there and hundreds of decent people suffered and suffered badly. Despite recent improvements I have decided that I must stop being a subpostmistress. When my post office closes, the village in which I live and the surrounding villages will no longer have access to a vital service. It will be a tragedy for my community. However, I simply cannot take the risk of continuing to work as a subpostmistress for fear of experiencing another large shortfall.

Statement of Truth

I believe the contents of this statement to be true.

Signed..

GRO

Dated.....

19/1/22 .

GRO